LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS

EXISTING CONDITION REPORT

FOR THE

FEIS FLAGTAIL FIRE RECOVERY PROJECT

BLUE MOUNTAIN RANGER DISTRICT
MALHEUR NATIONAL FOREST

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LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS

INTRODUCTION

The existing condition is the first of two sections for the landscape aesthetics report. The second section is for the effects of alternatives. This is an integrated look at the Flagtail Fire Recovery project area and its resources in order to assess existing conditions and define the desired landscape character.

Many factors affect the character of the landscape. Landscape attributes such as landform, vegetative pattern and species makeup, water characteristics, architectural elements, etc. all contribute to the aesthetic experience. Healthy conditions, resilient to natural processes that provide long-term enjoyment, are the desired landscape character. This report addresses social and bio/physical ecology. The desires of the people who value this area determine what is desired and the conditions defined by expected range of variability determine what is sustainable. A balanced combination is the desired landscape character toward which the forest should be managed.

The Scenery Management System (SMS) is used in addition to the Visual Management System (VMS) that was used in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Malheur National Forest (1990). The Malheur National Forest Plan includes forest-wide management area (MA) standards. Effects will be displayed for both systems.

Visual Management System

The Visual Management System uses terminology called Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) which are Preservation, Retention, Partial Retention, Modification and Maximum Modification. Except for preservation, each describes a degree of acceptable alteration of the natural landscape based on the importance of aesthetics. The degree of alteration is measured in terms of visual contrast with the surrounding natural landscape. Two additional short-term management goals may be required. The first is used to upgrade landscapes containing visual impacts that do not meet the quality objectives set for the particular area. The second is for landscapes having a potential for greater natural appearing variety. These short-term goals are rehabilitation and enhancement.

Scenery Management System

The Scenery Management System (SMS) requires an analysis that considers more than effects that impact natural appearing landscapes. The new scenery management system "***encourages integration throughout the entire systematic approach from inventory, analysis, planning, design, and implementation, to monitoring.*** . . .Through the integration of physical, biological, and cultural/social information in an interdisciplinary atmosphere we strive to better understand ecological principles and their relationships (such as landscape pattern with components, structures, functions, and processes of our ecosystem), ***to prescribe management which promotes sustainability***." (Agricultural Handbook Number 701, Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management, 1995, pg. 23.).

The Scenery Management System uses terminology called Scenic Integrity Objectives (SIOs) that reflects the goals for the area. The goals for SIOs are Very High, High, Moderate, Low, Very Low, and Unacceptably Low. The terms ecological integrity and

scenic integrity are used as general ratings of the existing landscape character. The scenic integrity level is a measure of elements that deviate from the desired landscape character. Ecological integrity is also considered in the Scenery Management System and it is the degree to which all landscape components and their interactions are represented, functioning, and able to renew themselves.

Regulatory Framework

Viewshed Corridor

About 1,400 acres, or 19%, of the project area is within the Izee Viewshed, which is Management Area 14 (Viewshed Corridors) and encompasses those areas that are seen from County Road 63. The county road parallels the Silvies River as the river flows in an easterly direction. The management goal is to manage corridors as scenic viewsheds with primary consideration given to their scenic quality and the growth of large diameter trees. Forest Plan Correction #1, dated January 31, 1995, allows salvage harvest in a visual corridor without corridor viewshed plan. The Forest Plan direction is to manage the Izee Viewshed with visual quality objectives of partial retention in the foreground and modification in the middleground. The visual condition is to be slightly altered in appearance. Residue profiles to be managed for are in Table 1.

Table 1. Manage to achieve residue profiles in foreground distance zones as depicted by photos in the Photo Series for Quantifying Forest Residues (PNW-51, PNW-52, and PNW-105).

	Ponderosa Pine	Lodgepole Pine	Associated
Natural Fuels	1-PP-4 (Photo shows very light fuels at 0.84 tons per acre)	1-LP-3 (Photo shows very light fuels at 4.1 tons per acre)	3-PP & Assoc.-3 (Photo shows light to moderate fuels at 11.9 tons per acre) 1-PP & Assoc.-4 (Photo shows very light fuels at 5.3 tons per acre)
Partial Cut	1-PP-4-PC (Photo shows very light fuels at 2.7 tons per acre)	2-LP-3-PC (Photo shows light to moderate fuels at 14.5 tons per acre)	1-DF-1-TH (19.0 tons per acre) 1-PP & Assoc.-4-PC (Photo shows very light fuels at 5.3 tons per acre)
Clearcut	2-LP-3-PC (Photo shows light to moderate fuels at 14.5 tons per acre)	2-LP-3-PC (Photo shows light to moderate fuels at 14.5 tons per acre)	2-DF-4-CC (17.2 tons per acre)

General Forest and Rangeland (MA 1 & 2), Oldgrowth and Oldgrowth Replacement (MA 13) and Riparian (MA 3A)

About 5,800 acres, or 81%, of the project area is within these management areas. Management direction for General Forest (MA 1) is to emphasize timber production on a sustained yield basis while providing for other resources and values. For Rangeland (MA 2) the management direction is to emphasize forage production on non-forested areas on a sustained yield basis while providing for other resources and values. The visual management goal is to manage for maximum modification which is heavily altered in appearance. Deviations may strongly dominate the landscape character, however, they must be shaped and blended with the natural terrain so that elements such as unnatural edges, roads, and landings do not dominate the composition. Oldgrowth and Riparian Management Areas are managed for visual management objectives consistent with adjacent lands.

EXISTING CONDITION

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Viewshed Corridor (MA 14)

When traveling west on County Road 63 from Bear Valley, the burned private land is encountered first and is comprised of mostly black boles of trees along both sides of the Silvies River along with groups of burned aspen trees. Salvage logging has already occurred on the private lands, including many visible skid trails, large landings with large piles of non-utilizable portions of trees that are close to the road and to the river. There are many small diameter snags still standing, reducing the contrast between private and publicly owned land.

On publicly owned land, the topography limits the viewing distance from County Road 63 to mostly foreground, which is defined as within one quarter to one half mile of the viewer. Only a small amount of middleground is visible. The primary feature of the view from the county road is the Silvies River flowing through meadows with live scattered and grouped conifers, hardwoods, including clumps of aspen and shrubs that add diversity in color and form. The meadow area had high moisture and green vegetation at the time of the fire and is relatively unaffected by the fire. Rock outcrops and rocky openings add to the diversity to the landscape.

Picture 1. Visual corridor near the junction of County Road 63 and Forest Road 24. The Silvies River is between the roads.

The upland vegetation of the visual corridor before the fire included structurally diverse stands of ponderosa pine with some small stands of lodgepole pine, aspen clumps, scattered western larch in the south half. High burn severity areas, where over 90 percent or more of the trees were killed, cover about 90 percent of the visual corridor. About 5 percent has a moderate burn severity where mortality ranges from 60 to 90 percent and about 5 percent has a low burn severity where mortality ranges from 0 to 60 percent.

The fire has changed the visual condition from slightly altered to moderately altered. The immediate foreground has stumps, most with blue paint still visible, slash piles and scattered slash concentrations that resulted from the removal of hazard trees along the county road and from around the Bear Valley Work Center administrative site. The road side hazard tree removal did not have the mitigating measures that could have reduced the negative visual impacts of timber harvesting.

The visual quality rating changed from partial retention to modification for both the foreground and middleground. The current condition does not meet the visual management objective of partial retention for the foreground.

Outside the Visual Corridor (MA 1, 2, 3A, 13)

The area is enjoyed for the positive natural elements, such as landform, vegetative patterns, and streams. The primary forest type in the area is the dry forest that includes a majority of ponderosa pine. Other species present include Douglas-fir, grand fir, lodgepole pine and western larch on the aspects that are more northerly.

Some mosaic patterns of burning intensity are visible, including some green tree patches and areas where the foliage was scorched brown but not consumed. High burn severity areas cover about 35 percent of the area. The moderate burn severity areas cover about 45 percent of the area. Low burn severity areas cover about 20 percent of the area and include non- forest openings and some riparian areas. Much of the vegetation that provided special interest to viewing have been killed such as large trees, aspen patches and western larch. Roads, landings and skid trails are more visible throughout the area due to the loss of screening vegetation.

The visual quality rating is currently modification which meets the visual management objective of maximum modification.

Picture 2. View Outside the Visual Corridor showing a variety of burn severities.

SCENIC INTEGRITY

Viewshed Corridor (MA14)

Due to the fire, the Scenic Integrity Level has been reduced from moderate to low. Currently, the foreground of the visual corridor has stumps resulting from the recent removal of hazard trees. Foreground and Middleground views are mostly burned and black trees. Roads are more visible throughout the area due to the loss of screening vegetation.

Outside the Visual Corridor (MA 1, 2, 3A, 13)

The Scenic Integrity Level has been reduced from moderate to low by the fire. The landscape views are of a mosaic of burn severities with color differences created by live trees and dead trees. Roads, landings and skid trails are more visible throughout the area due to the loss of screening vegetation, which reduced the scenic integrity.

Picture 3. Severely burned portion of the fire.

ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

Ecological integrity is an indication of the sustainability of a landscape, which affects the long-term conditions of landscape aesthetics. The existing ecological integrity is determined by considering the current condition of key resources and the current trends that exist.

Table 2. Ecological Integrity Levels by Historic Range of Variation

Ecological Integrity	Forested Area Outside Historic Range of Variation
Very High (VH)	0-10%
High (H)	11-20%
Moderate (M)	21-30%
Low (L)	31-40%
Very Low (VL)	41-50%
Unacceptably Low (UL)	51+%

The ecological integrity for both the Visual Corridor and General Forest was unacceptably low prior to the fire due to overstocked conditions and excessive fuels for the dry forest biophysical environment. The ecological integrity is currently unacceptably low because a large stand replacement fire condition is not typical of the way the dry forest historically burned. The dry forest does not reforest very fast

compared with the moister types where large stand replacement fires occurred historically. It takes many decades for natural regeneration to occur with ponderosa pine because seeds do not travel far from the parent seed tree and it takes many years for a new tree to start producing seeds. Noxious weeds are on the increase and may increase as a result of the fire reducing the recovery of native vegetation. Aspen and riparian vegetation have been affected by the fire but will be addressed by other analysis documents.

CONSTITUENT INFORMATION AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Historical Uses

This planning area has been extensively affected by historical uses that occurred in the area. Prior to European settlement, Native Americans used the area, and their practices, combined with environmental events, resulted in the area being frequently burned by low intensity fires that cleared the forest floor of accumulated duff and debris and most of the seedlings and saplings. The result was large diameter ponderosa pine and western larch stands that have an open park-like appearance, with a medium to high canopy that allows sunlight to reach the grass/sedge forest floor with patches of smaller dense stands in more moist areas.

As European settlement began to change the patterns of land use, the forest changed as well. Harvest of timber required the construction of roads, bridges, culverts, and railroad grades. The roads attracted recreational use. Suppression of fire became a management practice to protect resources and adjacent private land that, along with logging the largest trees, had diminished the distinctive character and sustainability of this forest landscape. The forest stand conditions were no longer resistant to stand replacement fires like they had been historically.

Recreational Uses

Today, the area is used by many people who enjoy a variety of activities. Cross-country skiing and snowmobile riding are common winter activities in the area. The Flagtail Mountain Loop Bike Trail utilizes County Road 63 through the project area. Driving the forest roads with ATVs and vehicles is a popular activity and may increase over past use when the roads are opened to the public in order to view the effects of the fire. Dispersed camping occurs throughout the area, primarily during the hunting season. Opportunities exist for visitors to view waterfowl, other types of birds, beaver activity, deer, elk and other wildlife. Some bird species, such as black-backed woodpecker, are attracted to burned timber, and opportunities for observing these have been increased. Hunting game animals and fishing are popular activities. Firewood cutting can increase with the number of dead trees available. Christmas tree cutting is an activity that won't be available for about 10 years, depending on whether the area is naturally regenerated or planted. Mushroom gathering is expected to greatly increase this year and then taper off in the following years. Horn hunting and other activities occur as well. Viewing scenery and enjoying the landscape is a part of all of these activities.

Commercial Uses

Commercially, the area provides range for cattle allotments and timber for lumber and other wood products. The best mushroom crops occur after a fire, and commercial harvesting in the project area is expected in 2003.

Public Values and Expectations

There is a wide diversity of opinions about what public lands should look like and how they should be managed, and this affects how a landscape is viewed. Based on local election results on local forest issues, most of the local registered voters prefer to have reduced fuel and safety hazards and utilization of wood products to provide employment as part of forest management. There are others in society as a whole that would prefer no commercial use of National Forests and others who simply do not like to view roads or stumps.

Heritage Resources

Prehistoric sites that exist are valued in light of their potential to provide scientific data to anthropological and paleoenvironmental research efforts. Lithic scatters display sparse assemblages of formed stone tools, reduction flakes, and occasionally ground stone.

There are historic sites that are related to railway logging and the Bear Valley Work Center with its structures of an old Ranger Station. These sites provide forest visitors with a visual connection to key periods in the history of northeastern Oregon. Railroad logging has played a prominent role in the history of the watershed. The Edward Hines Lumber Company constructed a railroad from the town of Burns to the town of Seneca and logging spurs throughout the area from there in the 1920's and 1930's. Railroad logging evidence include linear segments of railroad grade in various conditions, other earthwork engineering features, and remnant logging camp/temporary occupation sites. The historic structures are easier to see due to the removal of vegetation by the fire. Vegetation growth will slowly cover these features again.

DESIRED SCENERY CONDITION

Short-term Desired Condition of Scenery

- Visually the public will recognize that a wildfire took place because enough burned snags and logs are present to show that a wildfire was the cause of the openings.
- Vegetation includes vigorous growing native forbs grasses, sedges, shrubs, hardwoods and conifers providing visual diversity of colors and textures.
- Evidence of past management activities such as roads, stumps, skid trails and skyline corridors results in only a slightly altered landscape in the visual corridor.

Long-term Desired Condition of Scenery

- Natural appearing landscapes with high scenic diversity provide interesting and pleasant views for visitors.

- Visual quality objectives of partial retention and modification in the visual corridor and maximum modification outside the visual corridor are met or are higher than the minimum rating.
- Scenic integrity is high in the visual corridor and moderate or better outside the visual corridor.

Literature Cited

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